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Citation for published version:

Thorburn, M 2020, 'Embodied experiences: Critical insights from Dewey for contemporary education', *Educational Research*, pp. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1711437>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/00131881.2019.1711437](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1711437)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Educational Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Educational Research* on 6 January 2020, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131881.2019.1711437>

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Embodied experiences: critical insights from Dewey for contemporary education

Dr. Malcolm Thorburn
Lecturer in Education
Moray House School of Education
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Edinburgh
St Leonard's Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ
0131 651 6655
Malcolm.Thorburn@ed.ac.uk

Malcolm Thorburn is a Lecturer in Education at the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh at St Leonard's Land, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, United Kingdom; tel: +44 (0) 131 651 6655, email: Malcolm.Thorburn@ed.ac.uk. His main research interests are on values in education, especially in terms of how they inform curriculum planning and pedagogical practices. He is the Editor of *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling*, Routledge (2017) and *Transformative Learning and Teaching in Physical Education*, Routledge (2017).

Abstract

Background: Reflecting increased cross-disciplinary interest in the significance of the body in education, this paper considers that a greater appreciation of John Dewey's conceptualisations of experience and habit would benefit contemporary theory and practice-related concerns.

Sources of evidence and main argument: The paper draws upon pragmatist-informed epistemological insights into the nature of experience and the habitual body from John Dewey. In doing so, the paper highlights how embodied experiences could become more central to realising a diverse range of educational goals. These include contexts where students appreciate that embodied learning practices can play a reconstructive part in shaping their identity, as well as the culture and school environments they share with others.

Conclusion: The paper concludes by exemplifying and critiquing some conceptual possibilities which recognise the benefits of intensifying bodily experiences and cultivating related habits in everyday contemporary schooling.

Keywords: Dewey, habit, the body, education, experiential learning, wellbeing

Introduction

Since the turn of the twentieth century, there has been an increased cross-disciplinary academic interest in the body in education (Gleason, 2018). That said, the choreography of schooling has, for the most part, continued to require children to respond passively to instructions and bells and manage their bodies in a mostly compliant and ordered way. From a social theory perspective, this has led to authors such as Michel Foucault reviewing how the disciplining process can have negative and marginalising consequences for the body (Foucault, 1995). Adding to this concern, Kirk (1998) notes that researching the fine detail of the links between educational theory and the body has often been overlooked. This remains the case, notwithstanding leading theorists in education such as John Dewey (1916/1980, p. 147) remarking over a century ago of how ‘the body is, of necessity a wellspring of energy’, through which meaningful embodied experiences can contribute to nurturing personal growth. In this light, this paper focuses on how school education would benefit from an enhanced comprehension of the body, particularly in relation to what it means to be an embodied subject in modern school environments. Consequently, the view taken forward is one which recognises the benefits of intensifying bodily experiences and cultivating related habits in everyday schooling. The importance of educating the body in an integrated and coherent way was periodically mentioned in Dewey’s writings. Underpinning these contributions was a belief that our understanding of humans and the way they flourish could be enhanced by integrating mind/body thinking and by having far fewer instances of behaviour which could be considered as either physical or mental (Dewey, 1928). In a schooling context, Dewey when writing alongside his daughter Evelyn Dewey about Schools of tomorrow noted that ‘... physical growth is not identical with mental growth but the two coincide in time, and normally the latter is impossible without the former. If we have reference for childhood, our first specific rule is to make sure of a healthy bodily development’ (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980, p. 214). In this light, schools need to become places where children learn to thrive physically as well as mentally.

However, this position is not an unalloyed endorsement for the majority of Dewey’s canon of work. Rather, it is a theoretical position which considers that particular writings by Dewey at particular times nearly a century ago still have much to recommend them in contemporary education. This stance is designed to offset concerns that Dewey’s pragmatism can result in a narrow and vacuous focus on evolutionary struggles, endless problem solving and unravelling rather nebulous and open ended concepts such as growth (Carr, 2016). As Peters (1977, p. 104) notes, ‘what he (Dewey) needed was other criteria by reference to which desirable and undesirable forms of growth could be distinguished’, in a context where there was the time and opportunity for children to speculate about

the human condition in all its manifest disciplinary forms as well as investigating relevant contemporary concerns. A further allied concern in this respect is that trying to unite the dualisms between mind and body, theory and practice masks the distinctiveness of the body and of how the body should be recognised within education and schooling (Carr, 2016). Thus, while Kestenbaum (1977) considers that some critics of Dewey insufficiently recognised that Dewey's advice on scientific methods of enquiry were not designed to have a monopoly on illuminating experience other critics remain perplexed as to how the nature and structure of imaginative experience can lead to the emergence of meaning. For example, Hills (2012, p. 96) concludes by challenging scholars interested in Dewey 'to dwell on the limits of transformative power of imagination in experience rather than presume upon its powers.'

In taking into account the types of criticism raised, this paper draws upon three specific texts from Dewey's writing oeuvre: *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Dewey, 1920/1957); *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey, 1922/2012); *Experience and Nature* (Dewey, 1925/2009). All of these texts were published during the 1920s and all can, it is argued, help overtake the major concern of Dewey's experimentalist outlook: namely, that the concern of pragmatism with instrumental purposes obscured how the intentions and goals of education could be discussed and fruitfully decided upon. By the 1920s, John Dewey was already in his 60s. However, a great deal of his writing output was still to come, including the three texts underpinning this paper. Ryan (1995, p. 202) considers that 'the 1920s saw Dewey publish what, in most ways, was the most satisfactory account of his own ideas – clear, accessible, and full of wide-ranging suggestions' on how everyday experiences were steeped with meaning. Furthermore, the texts chosen were considered to be 'wonderfully thought-provoking, imaginative, and original, and like nothing else in twentieth-century philosophy' (Ryan, 1995, p. 202). Moreover, by selectively focussing on John Dewey's perspective on experience and habit, there is the capacity to bring to the fore Dewey's 'view of the social and moral dimensions of habit in the context of his larger metaphysical ground-map' (Cutchin, 2007, p. 50).

Reconstructing experience and the concept of habit

Text 1: Reconstruction in Philosophy

Following World War I, Dewey sought to utilise, more fully, intellectual histories and their potentialities as a methodology for exploring 'the crucial role that the precariousness and uncertainty of nature played in human experience' (Westbrook, 1991, p. 348). The main starting point in subjecting a mix of philosophy, scientific thinking and social inquiry to historical analysis came in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Dewey, 1920/1957). In this book, Dewey sought to re-examine Western philosophy and democratic struggle alongside social and moral aims, aesthetic appreciation and personal growth (Kadlec, 2006; Kumar, 2009). In taking this agenda forward, Dewey argued that the bifurcation between reason and experience was a needless false dichotomy, which as a 'mode

of philosophy divorces pure thought and logic from common, practical life' (Fesmire, 2015, p. 157). Furthermore, any method of reconciliation would be enhanced when 'rules are softened into principles, and principles are modified into methods of understanding' (Dewey, 1920/1957, p. 161). Such progress is consistent with Dewey's belief that human life can aid improvement (meliorism), as meliorism 'encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavour for the improvement of conditions' (Dewey, 1920/1957, p. 161). Accordingly, Dewey's view of transactions was one where knowledge was not separate from action but where knowledge was part of action. For Dewey, contemplative knowledge was not superior to practical knowledge; the theoretical was not superior to the experimental (Kumar, 2009). On this basis, Dewey's view on devising proposals for action from knowledge was more optimistic than a Foucaultian perspective on knowledge. To view matters otherwise was to unduly privilege knowledge over action and to distance knowledge in iniquitous ways for many in education: most notably, for those immersed in vocational (doing) rather than academic (thinking) education. In short, in Dewey's view, considering knowledge from a passive or spectator perspective was unhelpful in understanding human life (Ryan, 1995).

For Dewey, educational contexts were the best place to test philosophical ideas. Dewey's reconstructive vision sought to generate environments in which students learn how to thrive and cultivate 'habits of thoughtful, reflective, deliberate activity so that their lives might be characterized by direction, purpose and meaning' (Caldwell, 2012, p. 3). In short, this is to foster personal and social growth, and to pursue this for the most part through practical problem solving. For Dewey, growth is 'both to increase an individual's capacity for social intelligence and to translate that capacity into the generation of concrete good' (Kadlec, 2006, p. 537). In this light, growth is concurrently the goal and the process, the product of social intelligence and the standard by which it is measured. Such alertness to the conditions of growth can ensure that 'acquisition of skill, possession of knowledge, attainment of culture are not ends: they are marks of growth and means to it continuing' (Dewey, 1920/1957, p. 185). For, in Dewey's world, full engagement with the world can bring about a bolder and more enlivening attitude to change, as change is considered a positive matter which is valued for its contribution to improving practice (Kumar, 2009).

Text 2: Human Nature and Conduct

Dewey's interest in matters and areas such as skill acquisition, knowledge and culture was heightened during the period under review through the cultivation of the notion of habit. For, as expressed in his main work on habit - *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey, 1922/2012), habits were a way of acquiring socially shaped predispositions which enable feeling and judgement to be shown in everyday circumstances. As Dewey (1922/2012, p. 20) noted:

... we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is positive, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. Habit even in its ordinary usage comes nearer to denoting these facts than any other word.

Habits were thus at the core of Dewey's pragmatism, as Dewey considered that habits furnish people with their working capacities and that habits are central to understanding the special sensitivities of how human beings transact with their environments and grow and develop as individuals (Kestenbaum, 1977). Habits were, thus, markedly different from routines. As Dewey (1922/2012, p. 31) stated simply, 'habit is the desirable thing and the routine the undesirable thing'.

Kesterman (1977) considers that the use of habit as a philosophical category provided Dewey with the resources for recording and reflecting on the outcome of experiences, for exploring the omnipresent role of habit in experience and in reviewing the capacity of habit to intensify experience. This is on the basis that recovering a focus of pre-objective intentions is part of habit - whether it is mostly implicit (e.g. understanding in relatively automatic terms how to drive a car) or occasionally explicit (as when learning to drive a car). As such, 'the basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes' (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). In this way, habits cover the formation of attitudes which are emotional and intellectual and which cover 'our basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions which we meet in living' (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Accordingly, through exploring habit, Dewey sees experience as an intensification of engagement and integration with the environment. Thus, while experiences are contextually bound, habits also have an active sense-giving qualitative dimension which is emblematic of Dewey's pragmatism and his sense of phenomenology (Kesterman, 1977). As such, habits dovetail with various perspectives on the world - philosophical, social, cultural, moral, and geographical, and are something greater than a matter of personal inclination. Adopting this perspective avoids the dilemma of grappling with the concern that pragmatism is overly associated with a scientific ends-means, objective-based methodology and is at variance with a creative-informed thinking of habits. This rests on the idea that the distinction between mind and body, self and the world is a needless and unhelpful one, as these are united and not separate matters. Consequently, in practice, institutions (such as schools) can shape individual habits through their ethos and customs 'because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs' (Dewey, 1922/2012, p. 26). Therefore, school collective habits shape individual habits through their social environment and not the other way around (Cutchin, 2007). For this to be a positive matter and to avoid concerns about young people becoming socialised in unduly restrictive ways, habits should also be capable of being flexible and creative responses.

Dewey's interest in habits in relation to the body existed at both the practical and conceptual levels. Around the turn of the 1920s, Dewey was troubled by neck and back pains. A colleague at Columbia University recommended meeting F. M. Alexander, whose movement techniques (Alexander, 1918/2002; 1923/2004) affirmed Dewey's belief that mind/body experiences were continuous, situated and transactional in nature. Dewey exemplified his thinking on habits by outlining what he considered to be the myth of habit thinking - namely, that with regard to poor posture, it could not by itself be corrected by an act of will alone. Dewey's more wide-ranging notion of habit was predicated on considering that means-ends thinking enabled different (rather than fixed-ends) outcomes to be achieved. As such, actions such as walking, running and cycling are not the result of purely mental decisions but rely, instead, on sensitivity and thinking in responding to the environment, as habit intervenes between our wishes and the execution of our ideas (Ilundain-Agurruza, 2014). Consider my (previously unpublished) personal walking example below in terms of sensitivity and thinking in responding to the environment.

When hillwalking I usually use walking poles. If as happens occasionally I absentmindedly set off without my walking poles an adjustment to my way of walking is required. This is because the wider affordances of hillwalking - the aesthetic appreciation of space, the solitude, the physical intensity - will be diminished unless I can adjust and cope with walking without poles, as under normal walking circumstances the poles have become an extension of my body. This response might be achieved through a combination of slowing down my walking speed and/or walking at more gradual gradients. If these selective movement adaptations are effective then a feedback loop between me and the world will have been re-established through a muscular gestalt shift that enables the multiple advantages of hillwalking to be enjoyed again, as I will have found a movement harmony and overcome any pervading sense of tension.

This example highlights that reviewing habits from a Deweyan perspective can be part of ordinary life experiences, where action is not the end of deliberation but is, rather, part of the formation of a new general habit of action, whereby the continuation of the situational benefits of walking (appreciation of space, solitude and physical engagement) can occur. However this re-learning demands a focus and needs to happen quickly, or the benefits of activity will otherwise be overtaken by my inability to adapt to the relatively novel situation of hillwalking without poles. If this fails to happen my absorption in overly focussing on hillwalking without poles will overtake my more habitual and mediated ways of hillwalking, where the aesthetic appreciation of space, the solitude and the physical intensity benefits are visible to me and

rooted in my embodied being-in-the-world experience. Yet, if I can make the adjustments required, I will have found a form of movement congruence that will have arisen from readjusting my habits.

Thus, generally speaking, habits are applicable and transferable across many situations. However, when high levels of kinetic habit are involved, Ilundain-Agurruza (2014) notes that reverting to existing habits with which people are already familiar is possible and can stymie attempts to acquire new techniques that may be wished for in order to improve the performance of the body. For example, in the context of tennis, an already competent player may wish to change from playing one-handed backhand shots to playing two-handed backhand shots as the extra hand on the racket may well provide greater stroke control during fast rallies. One habit-related difficulty is that in the moment (i.e. during rallies) they may revert to the kinetic habits to which they are already familiar and competent (as evident by removing their second hand during their preparation for the shot). In these circumstances, they are unable to make the adaptations to technique (readjustments to habit) required. As such, they are less likely to appreciate the benefits that a more stable racket at the moment of impact can have on their overall tennis experience.

Dewey also considered that social interaction was pivotal to integrating the cognitive and emotional dimensions of behavioural responses, on the basis that habits comprise environmental features that merge inseparable mental and physical means and promote corporeal reflection. In a more social interactive context, Thorburn (2018b) exemplifies, in relation to hillwalking, how, in group contexts, fragility issues surrounding walking and the environment could be raised in order to influence students' collective decision-making about how to move across the ground in the most sustainable way possible. This matches Hill's (2012) view that imagination is a component of extending activity and that imagination (as with the walking example described) is required whenever activity is impeded and/or when a problem requires to be overtaken to extend or improve the quality of activity. At this time, there is a need to shift from unreflectively to reflectively recognising how to make improvements, in order to gain more intense and meaningful benefit from experiences. As such, habits for Dewey were not a vague and abstract matter but rather a situational and transactional concern, as experiences are distinct in nature and shaped by the limits of space and time.

Text 3: Experience and Nature

Until *Experience and Nature* (Dewey, 1925/2009) was published, Dewey had seldom written about art and experience. Notably, however, in the penultimate chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey moved from extolling empirical scientific methods of enquiry to considering more emergent and creative reconstructions of experiences. In doing so, Dewey engages with rethinking how the aesthetic appreciation of nature could dovetail with his earlier writings on reconstructing social and

democratic well-being. For, as Dewey (1920/1957, p. 127) had earlier noted, 'there is no more significant question before the world than the question of the possibility and method of reconciliation of the attitudes of practical science and contemplative esthetic (aesthetic) appreciation.' This involved ensuring that all efforts to separate nature from experience were avoided and that reconstructive experiences require being continuous and interactive, as experience 'reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference' (Dewey, 1925/2009, p. 4a). This approach, which Dewey modelled as a common sense approach, outlines how primary experiences define the problem and/or issue and provide the focus for initial reflection. Such beginnings define the context, for later secondary objects of reflection, which can, through returning to the primary experiences, explain, enlarge and enrich meanings. As Kestenbaum (1977) highlights, Dewey's thinking emphasises how the return to experience becomes the philosophical model and the basis for illumination. In due course, this fluid approach to learning, where students' continually integrate past and present experiences and where students' understanding of the world is constantly developing and adjusting, points to the interaction between what Dewey (1938) later referred to as the objective and internal conditions of experience. For Dewey, objective conditions make up the aims and content of experience and students' internal conditions help define their own unique mental map of the world. Consequently, Dewey aimed to engage, and progressively interest, students in educational experiences (objective conditions) beginning from their foundation of past experiences and perceptions (internal conditions). Thus, by utilizing the principles of continuity and interaction, Dewey planned to preserve learning as a process, while still aiming to achieve predetermined outcomes (Thorburn & Marshall, 2011).

Alexander (1998), however, highlights that critics of Dewey have seized on this apparently contra-pragmatist turn rather than sufficiently engaging with Dewey's writings about how commonplace experiences could yield enjoyment and foster intelligent meanings. Much of this criticism has focussed on how the ontological gap they perceived between the objective and the subjective could be bridged. However, Dewey continued to challenge his critics by outlining how experiences which are subjective and personal can also be continuous with nature because Dewey did not consider that subjectivity was distinct from objectivity.. To consider otherwise would drain experiences of their multiple qualities (Westbrook, 1991). In this light, examples such as adapting to change (e.g. in the walking example described earlier), highlight how reflecting on experiences as an empirical method offers up constructive possibilities for the potentialities of reflecting on human behaviour and of making qualitative improvements.

Experience and habit, educational aims and everyday schooling

The paper now critically considers the extent to which Dewey's pragmatism-informed writings on the nature of experiential learning and the habituation of the body remain beneficial to educational aims and schooling practices. For this relevancy to exist requires acknowledging the change in economic and employment backdrop between the early industrial era in the 1920s when Dewey was writing about habits, experience and more manual forms of employment in comparison with today's society, which is characterised by greater individual autonomy for exercising the body, longer working hours and more sedentary employment for many people (O'Loughlin, 2006). More specifically, it requires focusing on theorisations which plausibly connect the muscular capacities of the body with socially-infused movement enhanced experiences which can develop valuable habits of benefit to students. Progress on this basis can offset the possible limitations of Dewey's body-mind thinking, namely that it 'offers a limited perspective about what it feels like, in the first person and in the flesh, to be an embodied agent' (Caldwell, 2012, p. 29).

Such considerations should begin with the wider aspects of school building and design. As Burke (2013) indicates, there remains an urgent need, in times of economic restraint and lack of land, for inspirational architects with a deep-seated interest in education to consider the possibilities for imaginative spaces to be designed that enable greater movement both inside buildings and within the wider school grounds. Burke (2013) also highlighted, through reference to the career of Mary Mead, how it is possible for architects to work more closely with teachers and to recognise that children like to be active and mobile learners as well as having quiet and reflective spaces available. There is some evidence of the exploration of the benefits and possibilities of resourceful use of space in practice, for example through the work of third sector organisations. Such organisations work with landscape architects and interested professionals to promote enhanced student engagement with creative outdoor spaces and to improve the overall school learning culture. Moreover, emphasising the positive uses of school space and the premium Dewey afforded to play, problem solving and integrated learning experiences should encourage educationalists to review matters such as the extent to which schools address procedures which benefit learning.

More specifically, further incisive analysis from Burke (2018, p. 32) has emphasised the stultifying effects of adversely focussing on educating the upper parts of the body and ignoring the lower half of the body. Burke (2018) stresses the case for progressive education to free the feet and promote the sensory benefits of walking and the aesthetic possibilities of bare foot modern dance. In addition, Burke (2018, p. 43) highlights that, around the time Dewey was writing the three texts being considered, the English New Ideals in Education movement emphasised the physical as well as the cognitive; during the middle decades of the twentieth century, 'the exposed limbs of school children at play or at work was an enduring motif in the representation of the progressive school'. Since then, decline is evident, for a variety of reasons. For example, as Johnes (2017) notes, recent changes to

school accountability measures in England have focused on schools increasing the take-up of core academic subjects through the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). This has further prompted concerns that arts subjects (e.g., fine arts and modern dance) may be at risk, as they are not included in the EBacc. Such concerns about control and the narrowing of the curriculum are not new in education. Reviewing progressivism in education a century ago in the United States of America, Labaree (2005) contrasted how the administrative progressives dominated the struggle for control over school organization and curriculum content and planning in a form that has lasted to the present day. Thus, the progressive vision offered in teacher education and, less frequently in schools, has never influenced the practice of teaching and learning to the extent expected.

Within this modern day context, it is argued that those with an interest in increasing experiential and habit-related initiatives in education should critically consider how they can add something more continuous and greater than sporadic and occasional learning episodes. For, as Franks (2016, p. 361) notes, 'despite the prominence of the performing arts in and across cultures, the positioning of the performance arts in curricula and in schooling across the world is uneven and unsettled.' Moreover, within this context, Franks (2016) highlights a hierarchy within the arts, whereby there is a longer tradition and enhanced status for music and the visual arts, relative to subjects that obviously engage with the body, such as drama and dance. This is unfortunate, as full immersion in the practice of dance can contain aesthetic and physical benefits which can become heightened in significance when experiences are grounded in concrete practices (Alexander, 1998). In addition, experiences can be shared in a context, where democratically informed conversations on matters such as poise, precision, relationships, use of space, feeling and ideas on music, costume and lighting can collectively achieve excellence and a shared sense of telos (Thorburn & Stolz, 2017). In a Deweyan sense the shared context described above is vital, as Dewey valued the cooperative over the potential extremes of individualism and the hopelessness of aimless activity over that which is self-initiated and later shared (Peters, 1977).

That said, there is also the possibility that attempts to further enhance the education of the body can become ever more noticeable for their sense of discontinuity rather than for their continuity, interaction and multiple learning opportunities. Consider, for example, the Daily Mile initiative, which shows a marked rise in uptake and has become a deeply embedded and sustained feature of activity provision in many schools (The Daily Mile, 2018). Thorburn (2018a) argues, however, that the initiative runs the risk of being dominated by a 'one size fits all' type of compartmentalised thinking, which is quite contrary to Dewey's views on experience and habit. For these reasons, it is worth acknowledging concerns that there is a risk that programmes such as the Daily Mile used in isolation may end up adopting a deficit approach to physical activity (e.g. routinely completing a mile a day run to reduce health risks such as obesity). This is particularly the case if such a programme is

used in preference to a strengths-based approach, which is characterised by students identifying a rich array of positive exercise habits and lifestyle choices. With such concerns in mind, Thorburn (2018a) outlined how programmes such as the Daily Mile need to get beyond rigid and routine procedures in order to design programmes where sequential learning episodes encourage student decision making e.g., on personalisation matters (e.g. route chosen, types of terrain, running speed and distance), on engaging with the benefits of participation (e.g. log book, reflective journals, record of times taken) and sharing participation plans (e.g. future walking/running routes). If effective, a much more explicit focus on new embodied habits could ensure habits become deep-rooted and resistant to other school and societal pressures which may conflict with regular exercising. This line of thinking draws attention to the way in which further research and empirical investigations at the acquisition stage of learning (i.e. at a point beyond the beginner stage where students are often dependent on feedback from teachers but before students become expert in skills and can often solve problems automatically and without recourse to deliberation and review) are needed in order to inform how initiatives designed to take forward the education of the body in all its manifest physical and aesthetic forms, can be successful. Progress on this basis could highlight the reconstructive and positive role and that intelligent action can play in educating the body.

Conclusion

In relation to enhancing the involvement of the body in education, this critical paper has raised some demanding questions about the extent to which a greater appreciation of experience and habit can better connect theory and practice in education. In scoping out this critique, the paper has drawn upon three selected writings by John Dewey, in order to explore the nature of experience and the habitual body, and to review how embodied experiences can become more central to realising a diverse range of school goals, in an age where multiple demands compete for time and prominence. In this regard, the paper has sought to justify and map out, in more assured and convincing terms, how engaging more coherently with reflective and intelligent experiences can benefit the education of the body in contemporary education.

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